



MANTO'S PARTITION: UNVEILING THE VEILED TRUTHS

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the significance of Saadat Hasan Manto's writings in navigating the themes of identity, loss, and human resilience in the socio-political context of partition-era India, providing insights into the broader implications of Manto's narratives on postcolonial literature and historical discourse. Through a thematic and stylistic analysis, the paper highlights how Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khol Do" serve as stark reminders of the British colonial rule in India and the grievances of those who lived during this era.

KEYWORDS: Saadat Hasan Manto, Identity, Trauma, Sexual Violence, Indian Partition

INTRODUCTION

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) was a renowned Urdu short story writer who gained prominence during India's partition in 1947. While he was also establishing himself as a screenwriter in Bombay at the time, it was after his move to Lahore, Pakistan, that his literary contributions truly took flight¹. Manto's post-partition stories are highly regarded for their heart-wrenching depiction of the chaos and tragedy of partition. Today, Manto is regarded as a master of Urdu literature, and through his stories like "Toba Tek Singh", "Khol Do" (open it), "Thanda Gosht" (cold meat), and "Bu" (odor), Manto has been able to give an authentic representation of partition, allowing readers to empathize with the struggles, and resilience of those affected by this tumultuous period in history.²

Toba Tek Singh

Manto's last works, inspired by societal issues and his personal financial hardships, portrayed a complex feeling of human powerlessness amidst adversity. They featured satire bordering on dark comedy, exemplified by his final piece, "Toba Tek Singh."

"Toba Tek Singh" is a story set in a mental asylum during the partition of India and Pakistan. The narrative revolves around Bishan Singh, a Sikh patient who refuses to leave for India or Pakistan during the exchange of inmates between the two countries. Through this symbolic act of resistance, Manto reveals the irrationality and despair of partition and demonstrates how political decisions affect an individual's sense of self and sanity. In his portrayal of Bishan Singh, Manto delves into topics such as displacement, loss of identity, and the devastating consequences of communal rifts. Bishan Singh's persistent inquiries about his homeland reflect fragmented identities and a diminished sense of belonging. His character may mirror Manto's own anguish and uncertainty regarding identity following his relocation to Lahore. Manto wrote: 'I found my thoughts scattered. Though I tried hard, I could not

separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India'³, which suggests that Bishan Singh's character could be a manifestation of Saadat Hassan Manto's inner turmoil.

The setting of the asylum in Lahore also acts as a microcosm for the entirety of the subcontinent during this time, characterized by widespread chaos, confusion, and madness.⁴ According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the formal definition of asylum is "protection or safety, especially that given by a government to people who have been forced to leave their own countries for their safety or because of war." Ironically, during this era, even asylums and sanctuaries failed to provide comfort or solace to those taking refuge in them. Furthermore, the asylum is a representation of the Hindu and Muslim political leaders who put up a facade of helping the masses but were in reality not equipped to deal with their grievances and issues.

The random amalgamation of words that Bishan Singh utters, 'Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan' further highlights the broader theme of linguistic displacement caused by the partition. The loss of languages portrayed by Manto is not just about the literal disappearance of spoken words but also encompasses the erosion of cultural heritage, communal identities, and a sense of belonging.

The words "annex the bay" also hint at the life of the Indians in the British Army. The repetition of this quote, even in such a deteriorated mental state, highlights the trauma suffered by those who served Britain or were forced to fight for Britain under false promises of reward, money, and honour. Indian soldiers were the main constituents of the British army during World War I and II. Gajendra Singh, in his book: *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*⁵ exposes how Indian soldiers were subjected to discriminatory practices by the British military hierarchy. They were often given menial tasks, limited opportunities for promotion, and were segregated

from white soldiers in camps and hospitals. Even after the wars, many Indian soldiers faced neglect and difficulty reintegrating into civilian life. They struggled to access pensions, healthcare, and rehabilitation support and, in some cases, developed mental disorders such as depression and anxiety.

“Toba Tek Singh” serves as an exemplification of media propaganda as well. Manto writes, “One Muslim lunatic, a reader of the fire-eating daily newspaper *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep deep reflection, ‘The name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured.’”⁶ which indicates how literature and media were often used as tools to promote nationalistic narratives and reinforce stereotypes. During the partition, Hindu newspapers were writing against Pakistan while Muslim newspapers were writing against India, which made the masses integrate these differences into their identity and worldview. This consequently exacerbated communalism and exaggerated divisions between groups that exist to this very day.

In the story, one inmate also states, “I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree,”⁷ which represents all those who did not want to be separated on the basis of religion. Although communalism was undeniable among the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs by 1947, many people, including influential figures like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (Bacha Khan): a Pashtun leader and founder of the *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Servants of God) movement; Abul Kalam Azad: a senior leader of the Indian National Congress and a prominent Muslim scholar; and Mahatma Gandhi: a key leader of the Indian Non-cooperation Movement against the British, believed in a united, secular India where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other communities could coexist peacefully.

Khol Do

“Khol Do” by Saadat Hasan Manto delves into the reality of the partition of India in 1947. Through the eyes of Sirajuddin, the protagonist, the story exposes the brutality and inhumanity inflicted upon families during this tumultuous period. Amid the chaos of refugees pouring into Amritsar, Sirajuddin’s desperate search for his daughter Sakina reflects the pain of countless people separated from their loved ones. Manto’s narrative deftly recounts the underlying horrors Sakina faced, using subdued language to reveal the unspeakable trauma of her abduction and rape. This depiction not only highlights individual suffering but is also a poignant commentary on the wider social scars left by partition.

The story begins by addressing the chaos of migration during partition. Millions of people were displaced as borders were redrawn based on religious lines, leading to communal violence and the separation of families. Families like Sirajuddin’s were torn apart, with loved ones either lost or killed. Many faced harrowing journeys, enduring hunger, disease, and violence along the way. Manto also addresses how women, children, and the elderly were particularly vulnerable, facing abduction, assault, and forced conversions, by illustrating the appalling conditions of refugees.

The scene depicting Sakina’s attempt to escape from merciless rioters encapsulates layers of symbolism and cultural significance. As her coarse dupatta slips away in the chaos of running, it becomes a poignant symbol of “*lajja vastra*,” representing the traditional cloth used to cover a woman’s upper body, shielding it from the lustful gaze of men. In a society where being without a dupatta was considered dishonorable, Sakina’s plea to her father, “Abbaji leave it,” reveals her awareness of her peril. Despite facing danger from the assailants, Sirajuddin’s decision to pause and retrieve the dupatta speaks volumes about cultural traditions and how individuals will preserve these customs even amid grave risks. This brief, impactful moment encapsulates the dynamics of gender roles, honor, and selflessness within societal norms and the brutality of communal conflicts.⁸

Manto uses Sakina’s character to delve into the pervasive theme of sexual violence and women’s agony during the partition era. In the story’s culmination, Sakina’s trauma is starkly depicted when, misunderstanding the doctor’s innocuous request to “open” the window, she instinctively attempts to pull down her trousers as if facing another violation. This tragic moment showcases the psychological scars inflicted upon women like Sakina, illustrating the devastating impact of sexual violence and the lasting trauma it leaves behind.⁹

The story’s conclusion is haunting, evoking a visceral response from the reader as it reveals the sheer brutality and inhumanity that characterized the chaos of 1947. Despite the absence of explicit details regarding physical violence, Sakina’s symbolic gesture speaks volumes, serving as a powerful testament to the horrors endured during that tumultuous period. The reader is left to contemplate the profound impact of such atrocities, emphasizing the lasting scars inflicted by the violence and upheaval of partition.¹⁰

These images could perhaps be inspired by Manto’s personal experiences as well since he migrated to Lahore, Pakistan, from Bombay, India. He not only witnessed such horrific incidents firsthand but also dealt with criticism from conservatives who condemned Manto for writing explicitly about such events. He even had to face trials for obscenity in “Khol Do” under Section 292 of the Pakistan Penal Code¹¹ but still remained undeterred and continued writing despite many challenges.

CONCLUSION

Both stories analyzed in this paper make use of Manto’s distinctive signature style of realism, evoking a sense of empathy and introspection in the reader. They reveal the human cost of political decisions, the shattered lives that follow, and the trauma that lingers long after the events. Although Manto dealt with serious and dark topics, he infused his words with humor, wit, and sarcasm. His keen observation and sense of irony enable him to criticize the absurdity of society and human stupidity in a darkly humorous way. Manto was also not afraid to discuss taboo topics that were often considered controversial or scandalous in his day. His openness about topics such as sexuality, mental illness, and the impact of political unrest challenged social taboos and censorship. This

willingness to confront uncomfortable truths and push literary boundaries cemented Manto's reputation as a courageous and groundbreaking writer.

Saadat Hasan Manto eventually passed away on January 18, 1955, in Lahore, Pakistan, due to various health problems that were exacerbated by his alcohol addiction. Despite his untimely death at the age of 42, Manto left behind a rich literary legacy that continues to provoke thought, stir emotions, and spark change. Before his death, Manto wrote his own epitaph, which read, "Here lies buried Saadat Hasan Manto, in whose bosom are enshrined all the secrets and art of short story writing. Buried under mounds of earth, even now he is contemplating whether he is a greater short story writer or God." However, his sister believed that most people in Pakistan would not have the ability to understand such a joke and sensibly replaced the tombstone with one that said, "Here lies buried Manto who still believes that he was not the final word on the face of the Earth"

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